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ABSTRACT

Family and intergenerational literacy programs are intended to improve the literacy of educationally disadvantaged parents and children, based on the assumption that improving the literacy skills of parents results in better educational experiences for their children. A typology for classifying family literacy programs has two dimensions: type of program intervention (direct or indirect) and type of participation (adults alone, children alone, adults and children together). Four program types are as follows: (1) direct adults-direct children, in which both receive the most intensive literacy instruction; (2) indirect adults-indirect children, characterized by voluntary attendance, short-term commitment, and literacy enrichment events; (3) direct adults-indirect children, in which adults receive literacy instruction as well as coaching on reading with their children; and (4) indirect adults-direct children, which focuses on developing children's reading skills and involving parents in workshops or reading rallies. Although theoretical justification for the concept exists, research evidence of its effectiveness has yet to be systematically collected. Three issues have implications for program design and evaluation: definitions of literacy, the type of literacy that should be taught, and the locus for change. On the one hand is the "deficit" perspective that assumes that low income or language-minority parents have inadequate parental skills, practices, and materials. The other viewpoint is that the family and cultural context has value and should be used to shape instruction. (SK)

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Family and Intergenerational Literacy

by Sandra Kerka

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"Teach the parent, reach the child." Family and intergenerational literacy programs are intended to improve the literacy of educationally disadvantaged parents and children, based on the assumption that improving the literacy skills of parents results in better educational experiences for their children. Although theoretical justification for the concept exists, research evidence of its effectiveness is emerging more slowly. The research base spans a number of different fields, among them adult literacy education, emergent literacy, cognitive science, early childhood development, family systems theory, and multicultural education (Nickse 1990). Because practitioners and researchers come from diverse backgrounds, there is debate about definition, program philosophy, and instructional methods. This **ERIC Digest** looks at types and characteristics of family literacy programs and considers some of the issues in this approach.

Types of Programs

Family literacy programs focus on parent and child; programs that are "intergenerational" involve other family members, neighbors, guardians, and adult volunteers as well. Nickse (1990) offers a typology for classifying family/intergenerational literacy programs that has two dimensions: type of program intervention (direct or indirect) and type of participation (adults alone, children alone, adults and children together). The four basic program types are as follows:

1. **Direct Adults-Direct Children.** This highly structured model offers the most intensive formal literacy instruction for both adults and children and has a high degree of parent-child interaction.
2. **Indirect Adults-Indirect Children.** Voluntary attendance, short-term commitment, and less formal learning through literacy enrichment events such as storytelling characterize this form. Generally, reading skills are not directly taught, although adults may receive literacy tutoring.
3. **Direct Adults-Indirect Children.** Adults are given literacy instruction, often in seminars or workshops, and they may receive coaching on reading with their children and other activities that influence children's literacy.
4. **Indirect Adults-Direct Children.** In-school, preschool, or after-school programs develop children's reading skills. Parents may be involved in workshops, reading rallies, or other events.

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Nickse (1990) provides details of the examples given here as well as other programs. Kentucky's Parent and Child Education (PACE) and the Kenan Trust Family Literacy Program based on PACE are examples of Type 1. Located in elementary schools, these programs offer intensive instruction 3 days per week, 6 hours per day for 9 months to parents lacking high school diplomas and their 3- and 4-year-old children.

An example of Type 2 is the Carnegie Library's Read Together Program in Pittsburgh, which promotes reading in everyday life through storybook reading sessions, library membership for families, and tutoring for parents. The Family English Literacy Project in San Antonio, Texas (Intercultural Development Research Association 1988), an example of Type 3, includes the broadcasting of Spanish and English literacy lessons as well as parenting instruction via local television. Type 4 is represented by Running Start, offered in nine cities with Chrysler plants. First graders participate in book reading contests and receive free books. Reading rallies give parents practical tips on helping children with reading at home.

As these examples illustrate, family literacy programs may be offered in adult basic education (ABE) programs, libraries, preschools and elementary schools, workplaces, voluntary literacy agencies, and other community agencies. They typically provide adult literacy instruction, reading instruction for children, information on parenting and child development, and opportunities for parent-child interaction. Program staff are often an interdisciplinary team that includes ABE instructors, early childhood experts, English as a second language specialists, social workers, volunteers, and community liaisons. Other components may be survival skills for immigrants, linkage to community services, and computer literacy.

Needed: Program Effectiveness Research

As programs proliferate, evidence about the effectiveness of the family literacy approach has yet to be systematically collected. Some researchers contend that longitudinal evidence is lacking, although modest data from informal and formative evaluations suggest that programs are having some impact ("Myth #5" 1988).

The concept of family literacy is rooted in research from a number of fields. Nickse's (1990) review highlights some findings that support theories of the intergenerational transmission of literacy. Adult literacy research relates the educational attainment of children to that of their parents. Studies of emergent literacy, as well as cognitive science research, stress the impact of the family and social environment on cognitive development and literacy acquisition. In family systems theory, children shape family life and parent behavior as much as the family influences children. Studies of low-income families by Clark ("Myth #5" 1988) and Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (Auerbach 1989) assert that children's achievement and motivation are influenced most strongly by such family characteristics as values, standards, educational attitudes, and use of everyday activities as opportunities to explain and teach. The findings of these diverse fields lend support to teaching literacy holistically rather than as a set of skills, treating the family as a unit, involving as many family members as possible, and acknowledging the community context.

Among the few evaluations of existing programs, Hibpshman's (1989) assessment of PACE found that neither its theoretical basis nor the efficacy of its model has yet been proven. Questions needing further study are (1) the relationship between family background and children's educational outcomes, (2) the effect of changes in family attitudes and behavior on children, (3) whether replication of a program model in different

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environments produces the same effects, and (4) the differences in the outcomes of various program types.

Issues in Family Literacy

Three issues have implications for program design: definitions of literacy, the type of literacy that should be taught, and the locus for change. Definitions of literacy that underlie program practice are one of the most controversial issues in family/intergenerational literacy. To some, literacy is a set of measurable skills; a tool for self-improvement, productivity, and economic development; or the replication of school-like activity in the family setting. Others define literacy as social practices used in daily life, a means of empowerment, or the construction of meaning from experience. The definition affects the nature of the curriculum, instructional methods, and criteria used to evaluate success.

The meaning, uses, and value of literacy are not the same for all members of society. Fingeret (1991) asserts that the construction of meaning, rooted in experience, culture, and language, is at the heart of literacy, and she questions whether family literacy programs should teach the school's meanings, pressuring learners to accept the interpretations of the dominant group.

Auerbach (1989) finds that research evidence about literacy acquisition and the practice of program design diverge. She cites studies showing that "children whose home literacy practices most closely resemble those of the school are more successful in school" (p. 167). Auerbach notes that this is often interpreted to mean that low-income or language-minority parents have inadequate parental skills, practices, and materials. However, a number of studies (ibid.) show that families sometimes considered "illiterate" or "low literate" in mainstream society use literacy for a variety of social and technical purposes and that a form of literacy is practiced in everyday family life.

This "deficit" perspective underlies some programs that seek to transmit school literacy through the family. This model assumes that (1) homes of low-income and immigrant families are "literacy impoverished"; (2) transmission of literacy is from parent to child, ignoring the dynamics of many immigrant families; (3) literacy acquisition in school is either less important than in the home or already adequate; and (4) cultural differences in attitudes toward school or child-rearing practices are obstacles to be overcome in order to meet school-determined expectations (Auerbach 1989).

Nickse (1990) asks: Do we change the behavior of children learned in their cultural context to fit the requirements of the schools or do we change the practices of the schools to match culturally learned behaviors? Auerbach (1989) suggests that, rather than transferring school practices into the home, programs draw on parents' knowledge and experiences to shape instruction. Ethnographic research can be used to gather information about the family and social context, community culture, family dynamics, social networks, and values and attitudes. This information can be used to design programs linked to particular settings and learners within a meaningful context (Isserlis 1990).

Implications for Program Development

The following list summarizes recommendations of Auerbach (1989), Fingeret (1991), Isserlis (1990), and Nickse (1990):

- Program design should recognize the existence of multiple literacies and literacy behaviors in the home and community and attempt to integrate home and school literacies.
- Programs should build on the strengths of parents and their culture (such as oral language traditions, native language literacy) and set literacy education in a meaningful cultural context.
- Instruction in parenting skills should be sensitive to cultural differences in child rearing and family dynamics. Parents should be assisted in being advocates for their children's education.
- Family literacy programs need a holistic approach achieved through collaboration of several agencies and multidisciplinary staff. Parents must also be partners in the collaboration.
- Program evaluation should use the broad definition of literacy that guides program design, and informal and ethnographic techniques may be most appropriate. Fingeret (1991) suggests asking students to read, write, or talk about what they have learned rather than trying to measure a set of abstract skills.

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